

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



Zen gardens provide space for meditation

Troubled times and a hectic world have often called people to natural places, or cultivated manmade spaces, which emphasize quiet and reflection. A wonderful blend of the two is readily found in Zen gardens, which sometimes imply island-studded ponds, tea houses and pagodas, although a personal meditation garden might simply include a small corner of a backyard artfully designed and carefully tended.

Zen gardens function much like our notion of medieval cloistered gardens, which shut out external distractions while inviting peaceful contemplation. In a Zen garden, every element is further layered with abstract meaning and significance. A bed of raked sand or gravel, with concentric circles expanding outward from islands of stone, is both a metaphoric ocean and a reflection of a larger, unfolding universe. As a visitor, you are invited to reflect on the metaphor and participate in it.

Zen gardens are also places rich with subtle color and texture, a dynamic peaceful play of plants against stone, wood, and water. Everything is interrelated and important to the whole, which leads to one of the most enjoyable aspects of such designs: their year-round appeal. Zen gardens are not clusters of colorful borders or showy seasonal

displays. Although there may be an exciting burst of color in spring from some flowering trees and shrubs, like dogwoods and azaleas, the overall goal is to create a sense of permanence and timelessness.

A Zen garden should be equally attractive and inviting throughout the year, which is why evergreens play such an important role in their design. Black pines and hollies, moss and other evergreen ground covers provide a seasonal continuity, always green and alive, whether capped by snow, dripping with rain, or resting quietly through the hottest months of summer.

While larger garden areas may permit the visitor to wander about,

obtaining a variety of perspectives, it is more common for smaller spaces to provide perhaps just one unique vantage point. In many ways, you can approach the overall design as though working with a three-dimensional canvas, ensuring that every detail of the visible space is well-ordered, balancing key Zen aspects of asymmetry, simplicity, the natural world, and transcendent reality.

To facilitate a sense of mellow timelessness, it helps to introduce rocks with blended tones of light and dark grey, covered with patches of lichen. Contrast these specimens with smooth, river-polished stones, as well as black-pitted volcanic rock,



which can be highlighted with tufts of delicate maidenhair ferns tucked into crevices.

Obtaining just the right stones will require a bit of shopping around, and will take time. But taking time and making careful choices is an important part of transforming simple gardening into an act of "meditation." Zen gardening means that design, pruning, raking up leaves, nurturing transplants, is all part of the garden itself. Your Zen garden is a process — to create and participate in the garden is the goal of the experience.

Beyond stone, water is an important, primal component in a Zen garden, whether found in a quiet pool, a fountain softly dripping into a granite basin, or simply implied by a sea of gravel or lush flowing mosses. Water can represent stillness and calm; it sustains life and flows around impediments. A simple bamboo fountain embraces all the aspects of water, dropping from the sky, falling atop mountains, moving down through forests, across fertile land, and into the sea.

The plants in a Zen garden are most often woodland species. Ferns and mosses help reflect the quiet and venerable nature of a deep, ancient forest, as does lichen clinging to rock surfaces. Moss can be transplanted from one area of your yard to the Zen garden, although it is often propagated using a not-so-Zenlike kitchen blender. Remove a healthy patch of moss, place it in a blender with a water and buttermilk solution, and frappe thoroughly. The

resulting mixture can then be applied to stones, and "painted" onto other desirable surfaces.

Other shade-loving ground covers include fragrant Corsican mint, Irish moss, or varieties of creeping thyme for sunnier spots. Even club moss, sometimes called ground pine, a native of wooded areas, can be employed, appealing both for its Precambrian appearance and its bonsai-like resemblance to a forest of miniature pine trees.

Evergreen selections can include an assortment of traditional Japanese pines and hollies, as well as native species, like hemlock, American holly, and mountain laurel. Deciduous trees can range from a large selection of Japanese maples, with lacey, scarlet foliage, to native redbuds, viburnum, witchhazel, and so on, depending on desired height at maturity, texture, and growing conditions. Remember, of course, that simplicity is part of your design. You do not need large numbers of trees, just a few can create a metaphoric forest primeval.

The plants in your garden, especially trees and shrubs, will almost certainly require ongoing pruning and training. Zen gardens are not low maintenance, they are a commitment of time and self. More significantly, Zen gardens are not places for noisy, sputtering lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and weed whackers. They are places out of the melee of daily living which require infinite care and attention. Every leaf which falls to the ground is deserving of attention as you become a living part of the garden itself.

Zen by design

There are numerous books, websites, societies, and landscape designers dedicated to Zen gardens. However, one of the easiest methods for gaining inspiration and insights is to visit some of the fine Japanese gardens in the Washington Metropolitan area:

- Brookside Gardens, Wheaton, Md.
- Breezewood Japanese Garden and Museum, Monkton, Md.
- U.S. National Arboretum, Washington, D.C.
- Hillwood Museum and Gardens, Washington, D.C.
- Ippakutei, Embassy of Japan, Washington, D.C. (by appointment only)
- Maymont Japanese Garden, Richmond, Va.



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